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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR
INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND
SECURITY

SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-second year

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 19 of General Assembly resolution 51/195 B of 17 December 1996, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it every three months during its fifty-first session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). The report, which covers the third three-month period following the submission on 16 June 1997 of the second progress report (A/51/929-S/1997/482), is also submitted in response to the request of the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Military situation

2. The military confrontation between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance continued on all fronts during the reporting period, with the front lines relatively static until 20 July when Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud of the Northern Alliance launched a major attack and captured Charikar and Bagram airbase north of Kabul. This offensive continued until Massoud's forces reached to within 20 to 25 kilometres north of Kabul. The city came within range of rocket and artillery attacks. Taliban counter-offensives and additional military thrusts by Massoud's forces resulted in little change on the ground. Both sides used tanks, heavy artillery, rockets and aerial bombardment during these assaults, with total casualties numbering between 500 and 1,000 fighters. There were also numerous casualties among civilians.

3. In the central region, sporadic fighting took place between the Taliban and forces of the Hezb-i-Wahdat. Some 1,000 Taliban troops, trapped at Sorkh Pars between Massoud and Wahdat forces, managed to escape on foot, leaving behind their heavy weapons. In the west, fighting occurred in the Morghab river area in Badghis Province but with little change in front-line positions. Herat City was relatively calm. In the north-east, Kunduz City, captured by the Taliban in May, remained under their control, as well as much of the remainder of the province and the northern half of Baghlan Province. In early September 1997, forces loyal to Commander Massoud captured the city of Khanabad east of Kunduz and lay siege to the Taliban-held Kunduz airport. In eastern Afghanistan, anti-Taliban forces resorted to hit-and-run tactics, with small-scale attacks in the provinces of Laghman, Kunar and Nangarhar.

4. Mazar-i-Sharif was quiet except for an exchange of small arms fire on 21 August among troops nominally under the control of the Uzbek leader, General Abdul Malik. Calm was quickly restored. However, the situation quickly deteriorated when fighting erupted on 8 September in the city of Khulm (old name Tashkurgan), about 50 km to the east of Mazar. The confrontation started when one of the Northern Alliance's generals attempted to disarm a local commander, who declared himself and his troops loyal to the Taliban. The Taliban forces took advantage of the situation, joined the rebellious field commander and briefly took control of Mazar-i-Sharif airport and reached the outskirts of the city. These developments prompted chaos and looting in Mazar. Local offices of United Nations programmes and agencies operating in the city were also looted. None of the 14 international staff members was injured. Forces of Hezb-i-Wahdat and those loyal to General Malik recaptured the airport on 9 September and pushed the Taliban approximately 40 km east of Mazar. The situation became even more complicated, with General Rashid Dostum's return to Mazar on 12 September from exile in Turkey ostensibly to reclaim from General Malik his position as commander of the Afghan Uzbeks. Many of the armed units of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA) reportedly declared their loyalty to General Dostum. The overall situation in the area remains volatile.

Political situation

5. While fighting continued between opposing Afghan forces, the political situation in Afghanistan during the period under review remained basically unchanged. The Taliban faction, from its headquarters in Kandahar, continued to control the capital of Kabul and the predominantly Pushtun-populated regions of the country, while the Northern Alliance, comprising principally the Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara populations, controlled their respective areas from Mazar-i-Sharif, Taluqan and Bamyan. The de facto division of the country, largely along ethnic lines, continued to be a troubling aspect of the situation.

6. The six constituent parties of the Northern Alliance continued their efforts to form a more coherent political grouping under the name "United Islamic and National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan" (UNIFSA). The Front's new government, announced in mid-August, received a setback on 21 August when its new Prime Minister, Abdul Rahim Ghaffoorzai, died in a plane crash at Bamyan airport.

7. Rejecting the Front's claim to be the legal government of Afghanistan, the Taliban continued efforts to gain international recognition through the dispatch of delegations to Japan, the Republic of Korea, China and Thailand. In support of their position, the Taliban stated that the people residing in areas under their control were living in peace and safety. However, the continued factional fighting north of Kabul and elsewhere resulted in an increase in the number of internally displaced persons, many of whom had been forcibly removed from their homes and in some cases arrested merely for suspected sympathy with the anti-Taliban forces. The reality remained that Afghanistan was deadlocked in civil war, and its people bereft of effective government.

8. Foreign military support, in particular the resupply of weapons and ammunition to the two sides, continued unabated during the period under review. During the July/August fighting north of Kabul, witnesses reported that on some days as many as three or four transport aircraft were unloading their cargoes of arms and ammunition at Mazar-i-Sharif airport. There were also reliable eyewitness reports of truck convoys moving cargoes of arms and ammunition into Afghanistan during the month of August. The supply of war matériel, along with fuel and other logistical support, to all the factions only served to prolong the fighting and to vitiate United Nations attempts to mediate an end to the conflict.

Humanitarian situation

9. The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remained serious. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported in August that the number of direct victims of the conflict had risen sharply since the beginning of the year. Fighting in the north of Kabul, for example, had resulted in a total of 200,000 people displaced. Furthermore, ICRC also observed that the death rate among war casualties in districts north of the capital was alarmingly high, with one out of every two to three casualties resulting in death owing to lack of appropriate care. A joint mission of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that although the cereal harvest for 1997 was expected to be 18 per cent higher than the 1996 harvest of 3.1 million metric tons, emergency food aid was nevertheless required to meet the needs of some 1.75 million people.

10. A survey of landmine problems revealed that the situation was worse than previously thought. New information indicated that nearly 777 km^2 have been contaminated by mines, instead of 550 km^2, as assessed previously. Of this, 322 km^2 were in residential, commercial, agricultural and other areas classified as "high priority", and required urgent removal. However, the Mine Action Programme was faced with a severe lack of funding and urgently required US$ 4 million to maintain its essential activities.

11. Some 50 representatives of the United Nations, non-governmental organizations, donors, the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) participated in a meeting on 2 July in Islamabad to review the implementation of the 1997 Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Assistance to Afghanistan. As of 3 September, total pledges and contributions against the Appeal were $41 million, representing 31 per cent of

the total requirement of $133 million. Mr. James Speth, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, visited Kandahar on 2 September. He visited two United Nations-supported community-based projects, met with representatives of United Nations agencies in Afghanistan and had a meeting with representatives of the Taliban.

12. With respect to gender issues, I sent a letter to all members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination in June, requesting their cooperation in the implementation of the policies and measures adopted by the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs to promote the adherence of Afghan authorities to international legal instruments on the elimination of discrimination against women and girls. Ms. Angela King, my Special Adviser on gender issues, chaired the meetings of the Ad Hoc Inter-Agency Group on Gender Issues in Afghanistan.

13. With the permission of the Uzbek authorities, essential commodities were transported in late July from Termez to the northern Afghanistan city of Hairaton by barges. WFP brought in almost 2,000 tons of wheat; ICRC, 3,000 tons of wheat flour; and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (UNOCHA), 10,000 litres of diesel. In Mazar-i-Sharif, humanitarian operations were temporarily suspended in September owing to increased fighting in and around the city.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

14. Despite prolonged hostilities during the summer months, the Special Mission continued its contacts with the warring parties in an effort to engage them in political dialogue. In meetings with UNSMA, both the Taliban and their Northern Alliance opponents claimed a commitment to a negotiated settlement. However, their deeds ran contrary to the positions stated to UNSMA and revealed a desire to gain the upper hand over their adversaries through military conquest. Mission Head Mr. Norbert Holl held consultations on the Afghan situation from 18 to 27 June in Tashkent, Moscow, Paris, Bonn and Rome, meeting with Foreign Ministry and other officials and with former King Zahir Shah. Following his return to UNSMA in early July, Mr. Holl undertook a shuttle with the Afghan parties, beginning on 10 July with the Northern Alliance and concluding on 7 August with the Taliban. The purpose was to explore the possibility of holding direct negotiations at a neutral location outside the region between one representative of each side under UNSMA's good offices. The idea was to begin a step-by-step approach to reach agreement first on a ceasefire and exchange of prisoners, then to foster broader talks aimed at national reconciliation and a durable political settlement.

15. Both sides agreed on the necessity for direct talks and neither rejected the UNSMA proposal. However, the Taliban's insistence that the Northern Alliance take certain "confidence-building measures", in particular the release of some or all of their prisoners, particularly their emissaries who had come to Mazar to negotiate, was flatly rejected by General Abdul Malik of the Northern Alliance. General Malik stated that it was "illogical" to release prisoners of war before a ceasefire was arranged. He also made his own demand for the demilitarization of Kabul. In a second round of talks, the Northern Alliance appeared ready to meet (preferably within the region, albeit not in Pakistan)

without preconditions. The Taliban, however, refused to drop their demand for prior POW release.

16. Parallel with Mr. Holl's negotiating effort, the Governments of both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan continued to have their own contacts in Afghanistan with the parties. The Government of Pakistan has attempted to promote an intra-Afghan dialogue under United Nations auspices. This effort so far has not led to tangible results.

17. Regarding the prisoner issue, a number of prisoners interviewed by UNSMA personnel in Maimana, the capital of Faryab Province in north-western Afghanistan, and in Bamyan freely admitted that they came from various areas in Pakistan but it was not possible to determine whether they had any ties with that country's military.

IV. APPOINTMENT OF SPECIAL ENVOY

18. In view of the continued conflict and human tragedy in Afghanistan and the stalemated efforts to involve all the parties concerned in constructive and viable political dialogue, on 29 July, I appointed Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi as my Special Envoy on a short mission to consult interested and relevant countries and parties, as well as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and to present a comprehensive review of the United Nations peacemaking activities in Afghanistan. Mr. Brahimi started his mission on 15 August. After the completion of his mission, I will report to the General Assembly and Security Council accordingly.